

Frequently Asked Questions

Nova Scotia Guard

September 2024

How was the need for the Nova Scotia Guard identified?

- We've been carrying out consultations over the past year with our partners and Nova Scotians following the wildfires last summer.
- Three key takeaways came from these conversations – the need to improve coordination, communication and volunteer management in emergencies.
- That's where the new Department of Emergency Management and the Nova Scotia Guard come in.
- This work is all about how we can improve coordination and communication with our partners who respond to emergencies and better organize and deploy the many Nova Scotians who always raise their hands and step up to help when emergencies happen.
- The Nova Scotia Guard can deploy individual volunteers and community organizations with a broad range of skills and interests, from providing care and comfort, delivering food and shovelling snow to operating heavy equipment and assisting with large animal transport.
- The Nova Scotia Guard network includes a variety of partners; from businesses that offer services, equipment and resources during critical events to NGOs that respond during emergencies to volunteer first responders like volunteer firefighters and GSAR teams.
- For volunteer fire departments and GSAR organizations, being part of the Nova Scotia Guard's network will help foster a culture of preparedness in Nova Scotia, support good communication and coordination across the range of partners that respond to emergencies, promote planning and training at the community level and create a pipeline of volunteers who may aspire to become first responders.

Will volunteer firefighters and GSAR teams be deployed through the Nova Scotia Guard?

- Volunteer firefighters and members of GSAR teams will continue to be deployed through their current dispatch systems.
- Volunteer firefighters and GSAR members are also welcome to enroll as individual members of the Nova Scotia Guard based on their skills, interests and qualifications (e.g. chainsaw/brush clearing, radio operators dispatch, etc.).
- However, it is important to note that no deployment through the Nova Scotia Guard will interfere with volunteer fire services and GSAR services. Ensuring these services have the resources they need will always take priority.
- It is also hoped that individual Nova Scotians who join the Guard and increase their training and qualifications may develop an interest in becoming a member of a volunteer fire department and/or GSAR organization in the community.
- If that is the case, training will be provided through volunteer fire departments and GSAR organizations.

Can the Nova Scotia Guard help cover volunteer fire departments if firefighters are called to another area to respond in an emergency?

- If volunteer fire departments need additional resources, this will be supported through existing mutual aid agreements.
- The Nova Scotia Guard will not impact those agreements in any way.

Can volunteer fire departments get help from the Nova Scotia Guard in an emergency for non-firefighting duties?

- Yes, individuals that sign up for the NS Guard can be deployed to do non-firefighting roles after they've received the proper training to keep them safe.
- Volunteer fire departments can identify these non-firefighting roles and the appropriate training or credentialing needed to action this.
- As noted above, it is also hoped that individual Nova Scotians who join the Guard and increase their training and qualifications may develop an interest in becoming a member of a volunteer fire department and/or GSAR organization in the community.
- If that is the case, training will be provided through volunteer fire departments and GSAR organizations.

If I sign up as an individual for the Nova Scotia Guard, will I have Workers' Compensation coverage for my volunteer work?

- Yes. There will be a range of protections offered to Nova Scotia Guard members, including liability coverage, accidental death and dismemberment insurance and coverage under the federal Workers' Compensation Program.

Are you concerned there could be an overlap in roles between the Nova Scotia Guard and emergency services?

- The Nova Scotia Guard is designed to amplify the work of first responders by harnessing the goodwill of Nova Scotians who also want to help their communities before, during and after an emergency.
- To that end, the Guard will be deployed in support of emergency responders and the important work they do.

What are the next steps for improving the emergency alert system?

- Early discussions with municipalities, fire services and police services indicate two key areas of focus to effectively action Minister Lohr's recent letter:
 - **Guidelines and Training**

- Partners have requested guidelines and training to support decision-making when requesting alerts based on best practices and sound risk management principles to evaluate hazards, risks and vulnerabilities.
- This training will also be developed in collaboration with and delivered to fire services and police services in advance of these organizations requesting alerts.
- **Coordination at the local and provincial level**
 - Partners have noted the importance of coordination, particularly at the local level, when more agencies are involved in requesting alerts.
 - Coordination will ensure all partners have situational awareness and reduces the chance of conflicting alerts for the same geographic area.
 - We understand that currently, municipalities have different governance, funding relationships and reporting models amongst partners, which may include coordination when requesting alerts.
 - The Emergency Management Legislation includes the requirement for all municipalities to belong to a Regional Emergency Management Office (REMO).
 - REMOs will connect municipal decision-makers with police services and fire services to ensure that coordination is taking place when requesting an alert.
 - However, until all REMOs are in place across the province, municipalities and local fire and police services can work through interim agreements on how to coordinate on requesting an alert.
 - At the provincial level, in addition to issuing the alert within the timeframe in the Minister's letter, the Province will support REMOs to build the culture, confidence and readiness required for disaster resilient communities.

How can we improve fire dispatch?

- During the recent engagement with volunteer fire departments and GSAR organizations, members provided feedback on ways to improve fire dispatch.
- Members raised concerns about the discrepancies in fire dispatch systems, inadequate staffing and inconsistent training.
- They also highlighted the need for better integration between Regional Dispatch Centres, the need to meet future 911 standards, and the need to enhance the reliability and efficiency of the dispatch system.
- Modernization of fire dispatch has been identified in the legislation that was tabled this past Spring, as one of four items for further work with municipalities.

What exactly will the training and certification process look like for the levels of the Nova Scotia Guard?

- The Guard will provide a range of training options for its members depending on the type of volunteer work they would like to do.
- Every member of the Guard will need to complete an introductory course that covers areas such as how to volunteer in an emergency, Occupational Health & Safety and cultural diversity. This training will be provided online.
- After successful completion of this training, members will be able to support an emergency by working in a comfort centre, serving food, sorting donations, etc.
- Members of the Guard who would like to receive further training will also have that opportunity.
- This will include training (and validating existing training) for members who can provide first aid, operate heaving equipment, use a chain saw for brush clearing, etc.
- Incident response training will also be offered to all Guard members.

Some areas suffer from poor cell coverage, which impacts emergency alerts. What is the Province doing about this?

- The Province is making historic investments to ensure Nova Scotians in areas with limited or no cellular service will soon have better connectivity.
- The most recent \$18.6 million investment by government will enhance existing infrastructure and add more towers over the next two years.
- We know Nova Scotians need reliable cell service. It's no longer a luxury; it's a matter of safety and everyone deserves access.
- This is a priority, and we are committed to addressing it.

There are some concerns about recruitment and retention for volunteer fire departments and GSAR teams. Is there a risk that the Nova Scotia Guard will take away from the work of these groups and potential volunteers?

- We've said from day one, our goal isn't to hinder the important work of these groups but instead to support it.
- But we also need to ensure we have a much more coordinated approach when responding to emergencies.
- This is about finding ways to partner together and strengthen our collective response.
- As part of this, we know some Guard volunteers may also express an interest in joining a volunteer fire department or GSAR organization.
- We are committed to helping facilitate that connection and ensuring they can do so.